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THOUGHT-BUILDING IN THE PARAGRAPH

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The conventional way of speaking and writing is in topics; that is, in paragraphs developed. A topic is a particular assertion made of a subject. For example, take the term "war" and the statement, "War is destructive to human life": "war" is the subject; "is destructive to human life" is the topic—the particular thing said about the subject. A topic, therefore, is always a thought; the development of it, a paragraph.

This is a practical point of view to take of a paragraph, for by stressing it, it is possible to set forth a method of teaching thought-building that is designed to accomplish the following purposes: (1) to give the pupils mastery over the elementary principles and processes of thought-building; (2) to teach them to interpret, evaluate, and relate their experiences; (3) to bring them face to face with the mechanics and principles of paragraph-writing in such a way that they shall master them naturally; and (4) to lead the pupils into self-cultivation in English. The devices that are used are intended to relate the whole process, as much as is possible, to the experiences of the pupils.

In order to accomplish the foregoing purposes economically and efficiently, pupils must be required to speak and write paragraphs out of their own experiences. The general method of procedure is as follows:

1. Formulate a working thought or belief.
2. Call to mind and tabulate all the ideas, thoughts, facts, experiences, illustrations, analogies, and so on, that relate to the central purpose of the paragraph.
3. Examine these materials in the light of the common element that must run through all that are chosen, in order to secure unity.
4. Choose only the best materials; compare them in order to determine, first, how to group them; secondly, in what sequence and proportion to set forth the sentences and groups of sentences.

5. Having determined what method of paragraph development is best suited to the materials and purposes, set forth the working thought in terms of a fitting topic statement.

6. Amplify the topic statement, and in the meantime give attention to the mechanics and principles of writing, punctuating, etc.

Since this method of procedure is fundamental, I shall go somewhat into detail in regard to it.

The working thought or belief consists of two parts: the grammatical subject, which is generally the logical subject; and the assertion, the particular thing that is said about the subject. The working thought is analogous to a proposition in geometry. The subject or hypothesis is the stimulus that should arouse in the minds of the pupils ideas, thoughts, facts, experiences, illustrations, analogies, and so on, as subject-matter from which to choose material for the paragraph. The assertion or conclusion suggests or sets forth the common element which must run through the material chosen, in order to have unity. It is necessary, then, for the pupils to word their working thoughts early in the process, although they may feel free to modify them when they choose.

There are two types of working thoughts: first, those that have already taken shape in the pupil's mind in the nature of judgments, beliefs, or statements that have not been tested or amplified, as, "War is destructive"; secondly, those that must be formulated from concrete material. In this case, the common element is predicated of an appropriate subject. For example, a pupil may examine his knowledge and experience that pertain to fall, and conclude that fall brings with it a tinge of melancholy.

When the pupil has tested his listed materials for the common element necessary for paragraph unity, he is ready to determine just what subject-matter will contribute most to his purpose, to choose his method of paragraph development, and to set forth his working thought as a topic statement. An explanation of how to set forth a topic statement and of how to use the various methods of developing paragraphs may be found in almost any textbook on composition.

If one is inclined to think that these steps are too formal and wooden, he needs to consider only that they are in keeping with

the principles and laws of rational thinking. In following these steps is found the possibility of helping the pupils to master the technique of elementary thinking. This technique, I take it, is of as much importance to the pupil learning to think as finger exercises are to the pupil learning to play the piano; for only the genius can do it without learning how. In each case, moreover, the right kind of freedom, ease, and resourcefulness will follow the mastery of proper technique.

There are three stages of growth in developing the paragraph as I have outlined the method: first, the stage of imitation; secondly, the stage of suggestion; and, thirdly, the stage of originality. So far as teaching goes, perhaps the most important of these is imitation, of which there are two divisions: the model paragraph, wisely chosen to show how writers have developed paragraphs, and demonstration lessons, in which the instructor, by means of blackboard devices, thinks with the pupils and shows them how to build their thoughts into paragraphs.

There seems to be a growing feeling among teachers of composition against the use of model paragraphs. The trouble, I think, is not with the models, but with the kind which is chosen and the way in which they are used. There should be a suitable course in reading to go with the study of composition—a series of essays so chosen as to illustrate the writing of good paragraphs. For my own part, I now teach such prose compositions as Macaulay's *Essays* and Burke's *Speech*, not as real literature, but as models for composition.

To illustrate what I mean I shall use Macaulay's "Life of Johnson." In this essay there are many paragraphs that should be studied; some of them are numbers 5, 10, 12, 23, 24, 26, 33, 34, 38, 39, 42, 44, and 49. To be specific, take paragraph 5, in which the topic statement is, "His life, during the thirty years which followed, was one hard struggle with poverty." The pupil, analyzing this statement, finds, "His life during the thirty years which followed" is the hypothesis, the stimulus which suggests vaguely what may follow. Furthermore, he finds that "was one hard struggle with poverty" is the conclusion which sets forth the common element that should run through all the sentences in the

paragraph. As he reads the paragraph to trace this common element, "one hard struggle with poverty," he looks out for any other common element. When he has finished, he should be able to write a topic statement of his own, in which he makes an assertion setting forth a common element from some point of view and predicated of a proper subject. Frequently, the pupil should write summaries of paragraphs in single sentences and amplify them by using material that has the common required element.

To illustrate, take paragraph 10 in Macaulay's "Life of Johnson." The pupil, having analyzed the topic statement, reads the paragraph in order to follow the common element through and to discover a different point of view from which to set it forth in a sentence of his own. Having done this, he very likely would write some such sentence as this: "At no worse time could Johnson have gone to London expecting to make a living by writing." He then re-reads the paragraph to note the method of construction and to take notes on the material used, meanwhile adding such material from his own knowledge as he thinks will add to his purpose in developing the paragraph in his own way.

The following paragraph is what one Senior wrote:

At no worse time could Johnson have gone to London expecting to make a living by writing. It was a dreary interval between two periods of prosperity. Had Johnson gone to the metropolis of England in the preceding age, he would have received help and aid from the nobility; for that was the time when nobles patronized literary men. Bacon and Milton are examples of men who received such patronage. On the other hand, had he gone as late as the nineteenth century, he would have received help and encouragement from the people, and would have thus made money. As it was, even authors who had already made a reputation, such as Pope, had to struggle for existence. It is easy, then, to see from a comparison of Johnson's age with the century that preceded and the one that followed that Johnson lived in a time when literature was not a gainful calling.

This work should be followed up by oral recitations in which the pupils make significant statements, the predicates of which set forth common elements that run through a part of their knowledge of the essay. Then they should amplify them. In this way the pupils are taught how to speak coherent paragraphs.

Finally, the pupils should be required to read some good essays and magazine articles for the purpose of continuing the study of the paragraph. This kind of work will go far toward solving the problem of getting the thought out of the printed page.

The second kind of imitation is the demonstration lesson. Since descriptive paragraphs seem to defy this method of thought-building, I shall show how easily they yield to such a treatment. One of the subjects that I frequently use is "An Untidy Room."

First, I ask the pupils, after they have thought through the material that the subject calls up in their minds, to suggest working thoughts—statements in which the assertions made of the subject shall suggest a common element that shall run through the paragraph. One will say, "I once saw a very untidy room"; another, "I once saw a room that showed evidences of carelessness and untidiness"; a third will suggest that these are not specific enough—why not say, "A week ago I saw a very untidy sitting-room"? All of these suggestions I write on the blackboard. And so the suggestions come and the discussion continues until perhaps we decide on this working thought: "I once visited a student's room in which there were evidences of carelessness and untidiness." Thus we have completed the first step in our process—that of setting up a working topic for a guide in selecting material for the paragraph.

Our next problem is to stimulate the flow of implied details that shall prove the working topic in the sense that we use proof in amplifying a paragraph; for it is apparent that the method of implied details is the one to be used. To do this, we ask the pupils to think of the working thought as a theorem in geometry. Thus they discover that the hypothesis, "thing given," the subject, the thing talked about, the expression that should stimulate the flow of implied details, is "a student's room"; and that the conclusion, the definite thing said about the subject, the expression that suggests the common element required for unity, is "there were evidences of carelessness and untidiness."

Now each pupil contributes in the form of statements what he or she thinks is good material out of which to build a paragraph. I list them on the blackboard as follows:

1. The soiled, tattered curtains were ill-adjusted.
2. The air was close and stale.
3. To one side there was a bookcase, in the wide-open door of which dangled a bunch of keys.
4. The window shades were faded.
5. Books and magazines were strewn about a chair.
6. In the room there stood a rickety table.
7. On the arm of a Morris chair dangled a crumpled crimson shoestring.
8. On the table were a baseball, a glove, a broken package of cigarettes, the stub of a partly used cigar, and some ends of burned matches.
9. On the floor were an open shoe box, two discarded shoes, and a soiled collar.
10. The once well-made bed was littered with sections of daily papers and clothes.
11. There were no pictures on the walls.
12. There were no pennants in the room.
13. And so on.

Our next problem is that of selecting from our subject-matter what we should put in the paragraph and of setting forth the working thought as a topic statement. Here the pupil should learn the great importance of selection. As our guide in selecting we have the common element, "evidences of carelessness and untidiness." Testing the material, then, by examining each statement for the required element, we strike out 11 and 12 as irrelevant material.

In this part of the discussion the pupils not only learn how to select material but they also discover for themselves the principles of unity in a natural way. One will say, "I cannot see any unity in a group of things so different as books, baseballs, window shades, shoestrings, etc." After some discussion I ask, "What method of paragraph development is appropriate?" "Implied particulars and details," says John. "Very well; what are the details to prove—that is, what is the common element to run through the details?" After some hesitation Mary ventures this answer: "The effect of seeing the things that are mentioned would be the belief that carelessness and untidiness existed in the room." Thus the pupils discover that a feeling or mood, as well as a thought, may be the common element that runs through a paragraph or a whole composition.

Next, we examine the working thought again to see if it is sufficiently limited and definitely enough stated to be the topic thought of what we have decided to say; that is, does what we have decided to put into the paragraph adequately prove the working thought? It was generally agreed that we should write the topic statement thus: "Last spring I visited a student's room in which there were many evidences of carelessness and untidiness."

Then I ask the pupils, "Is this statement sufficiently limited and clear?" They are of the opinion that it is; so, "Now, what is our problem?" I inquire. "How to group the ideas and in what order to set them forth so as to prove the assertion that there were evidences of carelessness and untidiness," answers Catherine. So we set to work, and the result is the paragraph which we construct together and which I write on the board:

Last spring I visited a student's room in which there were many evidences of carelessness and untidiness. The faded window shades and soiled, tattered curtains had been carelessly adjusted, as if with no thought of their appearance. Old and used smells filled the room. To the left there stood a bookcase, in the wide-open door of which dangled a bunch of rusty keys. Near the middle of the room, but against the farther wall, stood a rickety old table, on the bare surface of which there were a baseball and a glove, a broken package of cigarettes, some ends of burned matches, a checkered cap, a shaving set, and a brush and comb from which the hair had not been removed for some time. On one arm of a Morris chair near the table dangled a crumpled crimson shoestring. On the bare floor, in front of the chair, near the table, lay an open shoe box, two discarded shoes, and a soiled collar. To the right stood a once well-made bed, littered with sections of a daily newspaper and with clothes.

Meanwhile we encountered the problems of the length of descriptive paragraphs, of coherence, sequence, proportion, and the mechanics of writing. Together we went through the various processes of attacking and solving them. The pupils were delighted with their work, for they knew that they had really learned something.

For the next lesson I assigned the following subjects: (a) "A Typical Country Store"; (b) "My Friend's Study"; (c) "The Old Blacksmith Shop"; (d) "My Friend's Workshop"; (e) "A Glimpse of an Old Attic"; (f) "A Typical Boy's Room"; (g) "A Typical Girl's Room"; (h) "A Typical College Boy's Room";

(i) "A Typical College Girl's Room." From these each pupil was to select one subject and write one paragraph.

Let it not be understood that the pupil is always to begin his paragraph with a topic statement, or that it is necessary for him to incorporate it bodily anywhere. It would be, of course, too mechanical, and would show the pupil to be sadly lacking in resourcefulness. Nevertheless, he should be permitted to use the topic statement as a guide until he becomes familiar with the process, then he will naturally vary his composition.

Typical demonstration lessons should be worked out to illustrate all the common ways of developing the paragraph, as well as the common thought-processes. Demonstration lessons on the following assignments will help to attain the desired results: (1) sequence and time relation; (2) citing incidents or examples; (3) cause and effect; (4) comparison; (5) contrast; (6) various kinds of illustration; (7) testimony; (8) implied particulars, testing the truthfulness of general statement; and (9) analogy. In mastering the thought-processes involved in these assignments, due consideration will have been given to induction and deduction.

The two types of imitation should be followed by a great deal of work, both written and spoken, in which the part that the teacher plays is suggestion. The test of whether the pupil is getting hold of the work is his inclination to use it in his oral recitations; for if our teaching of composition does not carry over in ordinary recitations, it fails.

There are two types of suggestions: the first consists of what the teacher should do in assigning composition lessons; the second consists of suggestions that should be given to keep the pupils working on the problem of reciting in paragraphs.

Much may be said on what the teacher should do in assigning subjects for compositions. What I shall say must be very general. Early in the course, perhaps, the teacher should make the assignments in well-worded working thoughts that crystallize the common experiences of the pupils definitely enough to serve as topic statements. Later he should assign subjects or topics. In either case the student should feel free to modify the suggested topics or subjects to fit his own experiences. In all cases the teacher must

make sure that there is interest in the assignments. If an interest does not exist, he must create it; he must, if possible, make the pupils feel that there is a fascination about the subjects. Again, he may consider with them appropriate materials; he may discuss with them the choice of methods for development, such as analogy, details, illustrations, cause and effect, contrast, and so on.

Pupils should as a rule recite in topics. This means that they must develop paragraphs orally every day. Whatever the teacher does to assist them in this process is the second type of suggestion. Here the teacher must be skilful and resourceful. He may frequently say, "Tomorrow, come to class prepared to recite in paragraphs, to make statements that shall set forth a central thought; imply particulars and details; suggest contrast, comparison, analogy; call for illustrations; set forth a common element that runs through a part of the lesson; express a thought interesting to you; set forth the contribution of the lesson to you; suggest time and relation or cause and effect, and so on. We shall develop such statements into paragraphs." By using suggestions necessary to carry out this kind of assignment in class recitation the teacher will vary the pace so that he shall get the best, the very best, that each student can do.

The next and last stage in the progress of teaching the paragraph is the stage of originality. In this stage the pupil is able to select his own subjects, set up his own working thoughts, organize and choose his own materials, and otherwise develop his paragraphs without assistance.

These three stages of progress in developing the paragraph—namely, the imitation stage, the stage of suggestion, and the stage of originality—are not mutually independent. I have treated them separately for convenience. One may use all three in one month's work or in three successive assignments.

The question of teaching thought-building in the paragraph, the topic developed, the conventional way of writing and speaking, should be interesting to other teachers than those of geometry and composition; for certainly every teacher should contribute something to the pupils' ability to build thought paragraphs. John Dewey has said that the real business of education is to teach pupils

to think. Moreover, the time has come when all recitations should be conducted in the English language and not in spasmodic, ejaculatory fragments. The method herein set forth may be used so informally that the pupils may discover and solve in a natural way the problem of elementary thinking and of composition inductively. There is, however, enough of the mechanical in the process to make the whole operation definite and tangible; guided by it, the pupils should always know where they are and what they are doing. If for no other reasons than these, they will welcome a sane presentation of this method with open arms.